

38 POEMS



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THEORY THEORY THEORY

TO MY AMERICAN FRIENDS
JAMES A. DECKER
PARKER TYLER
CHARLES HENRI FORD
HARRY ROSKOLENKO

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POEMS FROM A WORK IN PROGRESS

IN the spinster room where came no birth or death,
Above the strife, my linnet-hours I spent.
For many days my dancing eyes had sucked
A message from the death mask on the wall:
The craggy features, chin like cloven oak,
The bolted prison mouth and shuttered eyes
Forced words, but offered none: the brow beat
Back my fingers' kisses, stopped my mouth.

Today I cracked these shackles; with my lath
Lashed into frenzy, broke the brazen arm
That tricked my tickle-brain under a cloak,
Sped like a winter-pleasure to the room
Where Nemesis upon his niche held fast:
Smashed back the blind cast, and choked with dust.

I snatched the shape of visions in a dream
Dreaming a land of visions as I walked:
And by my hip love's angel paced in black,
And through my head a devil pranked in white
Trod in a trance, forgot to bare his blade
And crop the dangling fruit his boy's eyes loved.
My feet were doves, all silvered in my tears,
My swift hands fishes, salmon of the moon,
And from my globe of words a scarlet rose
Measured me problem's patterns like an eye.
My sable sideman smiled, bidding me stay
With known, and let the unsought cipher rot:
Yet, waking from his circled heaven, my ape
With scorching diamonds beguiled my doves.

So it was fated: set upon a hill
Lay palm-high wizards buried in a stone,
Nourished by raven's descant, by the trees'
Gaunt question of the winter moon. At dawn
An ice-age slumber clove their thorny tongues
And silence, stiff as candles round a corpse,
Armoured their feeble flame. This hill I clomb
Ere cock-crow scratched his wiry niche in clouds:
Alms-can, my saviour, mumbled in my clutch
A song of sorrow. Like a wraith I stepped.
Knock. 'No word will come,' the black word came.
Knock, knock. 'Ask the raven as he drinks
Your vine-drops.' 'Ask the echo, ask the trees,
We are dying, dead.' Knock . . . knock.

There is a tree within a spinning seed
Inside a stiff mole's head. Sir Craven Hawk,
He of the five-knifed hand, from out his tower,
Comes me a-coursing on a summer morn.
Boltwise he droppeth down upon the green
Blood of earth, snuffing the sexton's friend.
Now, with a sigh, as who should say what flesh!
Pinion unfolds and brothers turret wisps,
Until my ape, envy of kite as kith,
Kins me with gesture, shouts into my mouth,
'Look up! He's out of sight!' My ticking dial
Now mocks me with a song whose chorus cries:
'Within the mole, the seed, and on the tree
Burgeoned the blossom that you dreamt to drag!'

Then voice came to me from the land of bones :
' As water unstable nor shalt thou excel,
Though thou hast raiment plucked from empire's ruin,
Lashed into stony places, to the leopard's lair,
The morning's minions, children of the sky ;
And country-colours, safe as old crone's hand,
Witched into winter-grey and left boughs bones.'
So my dream ended, I from the visions fled
Into the fields alone, nor did my box
Mansion a mammon, nor stepped my side-man light
Into the light of mourning. I was alone !
And as I raised my eyes the roses shrank,
Covering with petal's mist my moving feet.
Upon the glistening grass lay two dead doves.

Above the clotted clouds a riding bird
Mounts over man : shuddering, his shade
Clouds like forgotten dreams the mind of mole
Safe under sod : the wiry hand makes sign
Of recognition through the soil. So man,
Feeling the future's shade across the plain,
Huddles in darkness, listens to the lap
Of purple channel in the brother's vein,
Hating his fear, sharing his unthought dread,
Afraid to move or look, fearing the word.
After the storm the scavenger flies home
To rocky ruin in among the crags :
The mole awakes and mumbles over graves :
And man takes up the sword, forgets to love.

Taking my tired heart in wizened hands
I wept: wept to the nodding banners left
Where the cold knife broke the dusky gold
For bread; wept to the patient brother mole,
Making his bed a thousand worlds away
From needle eyes that kill the flower they kiss.
Only the flint swung in my echoing cave
Could keep me manwise, head against the stars:
Only the magic of a pear-tree dream,
Before lust's eagle urged my hankering limb,
The small voice whispering dusty rooms, years
Before sunlight picked the lock that baffled sight,
Only that music tautened strings and stays
And kept me rigid while my ruin prowled.

In my starlit history bright moths
Like lace-frail hands beside a shadowed grave
Grew from my dreams. Hear by the word their wings
Hatch in the quiet violet's veils of fantasy
My trembling hand halt edge and fluttering up
Share brotherhood with branch. The dying year
Bequeathed me bones in iron scroll, left home
A heap of ashes where the adder's brood
No native brook, mandrake where roses lay,
Only a nettle-welcome to a corpse's prayer.
But these last nights, lean as a pauper's cur,
Meagre, are meat enough to clothe the sticks
I cherish. Out from the star-decked branches, moths
Wander their way like music through a mist.

The trinket hour set in a century's foil
Etched love and laughter in my itching bone,
And spun a warp that wound my phoenix round.
The day of sunlight grew a beard of musk
And centaury, incenséd in pavilion
Shot its bright bolts inside my portalled dream.
Deep in a forest like a giant's hair
The twilit trolls danced madness into peace
And plucked the godhead's golden minutes like
Bright plums. There dwelt a maiden, fair
In the flesh, but rotten in the womb. Her hand
Shed daggers as a death drops tears.
Wreathing a flowered pattern through my sleep,
Feet wrought a pathway to her golden doom.

Sir Lancelot, between the thighs I smirked.
(Sticks in the golden rushes O). My lance
Showed me the pathway, loud wound my horn my words
Into the shell. (Ask of the frozen stone !)
Sir Fatherfast, under the silken sheet
My trade I plied nor prayed to plight a troth,
Only that she into the black night's sleeve
Should rede me riddles, unlock the dumb bell's tongue.
(Ask of the stone, I say.) The morrow's morn,
Minstrel I moneyed, knowing his string-delight,
Knowing the gilded finger point a way
Up hill or down. (Ask till the stone falls blind !)
Lanceless I left, leaving my wounded horn
Behind in bower, seeking the mouths of stone.

Rushing like Eloï over broken homes
With tongue of bones, the streaming hair
Of truth lashes my eyes to iron, and sinks
Under the giant-mould my gasping globe.
Hung on a hill for birds, my naked head
Whistles the word the truant wind holds best,
While strands that swung a blade, gaunt as tree,
Bride to the Northern Lights, the sacred bread
Spat by a pilgrim in his forest way,
Falls in the feathered palace like a shell,
Blows the grim yarning grandam from the door
Of hope. Beneath the warping board, a root
Thrusts a frail finger into worlds we loved,
Shows how tomorrow tires of our dreams.

A vixen's lair, laid in the tomb of a prince
Lures my mind's madness sweetly. In its ruin
Love flaunts his singing tatters as a robe
And robs the public rose to prank his hair;
Even the lamb of God in truth can see
How paupers strut to glory over dung.
Across the mourning hills the swallow's scream
Brays brazen, like hell's trumpet. In my ears
The red blood roars, sour as a childhood dream,
While never more near than hope, my fingers' silk
Paints Christ across my angel chrysalis.
But, with a virgin's wink, the rusting string
Snaps in a hand, frail as a broken bird . . .
Leaves empty years to tempt an iron tongue.

I have shrunk startled at the scream of moths
In autumn ivy, have tottered as with stealth
The pauper wren, wrapped in my woolly blood,
Knocked on my heart for comfort in the cold.
Was there a man whose hands like silver knives
Cropped mercy from an apple-tree in spring,
Cut to the frozen bone the fruits of peace
And shot with words love's linnets as they flew?
Perhaps in my breast the vinegar still creeps
That nourished such a man, from whose eyes
The selfsame bitter message moves. Horror
Should with crimson mouth make woe if such
Is truth. But stay, my hand before my face
Holds not the gathered flowers, but five bright swords!

When gods doubt days and out of red see ruin,
Who stands amongst us, ready for his end?
When dog bites dog, and devil with his nail
Undoes the hopes of sexton, flouts the wren
And scatters dust upon the hallowed sticks,
Who shall give answer, who with rotting tongue
Broider sweet systems, cities juvenate?
Under the whoring eyes of stars, winking
I waited Death's knock in my heart of ice,
Hindered the patient worm upon his quest,
Found only this beneath the lichenèd stone;
"The toad's skull split, no amethyst is found,
(What ducat can man coin from haloed head?)
Nor are there pockets in a pauper's shroud."

The toppled town forgets the kiss of musk
At moth-time, skull demands the simpler scent
Of earth, and in the purple heaven of princes
Only a shade shoves lepers from the board.
Drunk with the ichor wrung from aching eyes,
The spirit totters, tattered, sport of winds
Blowing where they list through the dark mind.
Rusting in dew, the fleshless sword, ghost
In a corner, watches the falcon's midnight glee.
This is a tale of ruin, writ in a wasted
Year. The haggard children creeping from
My hand's despair, turn eyes like dying flowers
To bid good-day: their wizened leaves of hands
Flutter like wings, and groan, and then lie still.

‘ The alabaster name in numbered word
Shall, in a dungeon-darkness, drain to death;
Love’s diamond in a red alembic mock
Mouther, the moon, and tawny wind force cloud
And leaf, the summer’s brother, out of breath.
Mountain unto mountain, each to each,
Move manwards through the world nor take no heed
Of Nemesis with thunder in his cap,
Whose finger, foul as hawk, despises love,
But picks the flowered blood unto the bone
And in the stony socket bawds his tongue.
Heed have ye! In the silken tent let sword
Before portal stretch his wary limb. Care
Shall with sharper nail kill larger fowl! ’

Bell-mouth! if madman words were rope I'd swing,
And few the silver tears get from you!
I taste the track your double wind blows now,
I've tumbled to your crows decked out as doves:
And I can tell you, hell across my heart,
That first time out along the razor-crag
I see your shape, fall to your knees and beg
The snake to snick with quicker knife than mine!
But there I go, flailing the velvet world
With brittle sticks, and none to hear my word.
Out in the street I feel the voice of man
Pluck coldness from a stone unto his heart,
While in my reeling room the flowers' eyes
Follow my every move, my every sigh.

Doom in the bell, and blood upon the flower
Twitches my feeble sticks: inside my ear
A devil crouches, muttering of the night.
His viper-words like velvet stroke my brain
To frenzy, words that are swords and worse than steel:
'Out of a land of eyes came first a priest
Sweet with a snake's desire, upon whose head
The future's thunder thatched a flaming mane
Of godshaped falsehood from a flower's bell,
Which minion, muffled by his swinging lute,
Laid bare the villages with silken saws
And left upon the boughs in place of fruit
His son, untimely ripped from future's tomb:
Go ye! Do likewise, ere the glass shall run! '

Now Time has painted dearth across my heart,
And those are coral that were once my eyes,
I sit, watching the winter's breath upon
The pane. Under a cloven cloak, a man
Offers his twitching twigs for my poor crumbs.
Is it my father? Beneath his rags a bone
Box grins riddles from its wormy holes.
I see a stone swinging on hempen cords
Between his cage's bars, where no bird sings.
My loaf he takes, he takes my love of life
Under his creeping tatters, forked to his side.
I shudder as I watch my father's hairs
Drop ants and scorpions; shudder as I find
My fleshbare fingers folding over ants.

White-eyed, the questing tiger slides his length
Beneath my graveyard sheet, and as I smile
My ears grow friendly to the scream of moles.
Love and let thrive, I tell my brother box,
Is lightning mine that lusty lads should crave
And drag their desert-longing four winds' ways,
While I, stroking a penance out of prickly stars,
Have power to give, have will to shed my gold?
The moon with inmate grimace moves her lips
And shows my words are winged. A tree nods,
Nudges his cousin owl and sings a storm:
Out on the plain I hear a bird's applause.
Soil falls, wood warps, a pauper muscle moves:
I smell a voice: "The spade!" it shrieks, "The spade!"

That is the answer, that the last shape of truth :
The final minute no man's history is
But his, and from his box no word may wind
Its seagreen treachery about the ears
Of shapes, mourning the passing of a shape.
From the dry sticks no gushing oil can leap
Into their frozen hearts and coin them gold.
They are alone, knowing not who they are,
Or whom the misty stranger in their midst :
They are alone, feeling no pain but theirs,
Knowing not whose is lot to brother next
The six-foot cedar swinging through the ground.
All they can hear are echoes from the roots,
A voice that screams of spades, and then is still.

DEATH MASK

Hid by the stone stare, I dreamt a fox
With bloody beard: the sneering lip
Spring-hung, to kiss my hand with fang
Before the clicking second's foot could flee:
Back from the nostril's grin I watched a flower
Wither and groan, fall black upon the patient floor.

Through many dreams this hanging drum of wax
Followed my motion, waiting a slip
It seemed; and days, however long,
Led always to the dusty room, where he
Watched. By day and on the hills the power
Slept; but moon would always find him at the door.

So the thread wound: joy snapped like elder sticks,
Brittle in winter. The thunder's clap
In silence plagued my mind; song
Shrank in the caverns of my heart. He
Tempted, till my hands snatched in their fear,
Only a spider's web, brain to the mocking leer.

SEE-SAW ON DYING

THE bent-bone muscle spent the sacked heart
Nightly neigh their pain as my mind's rats gnaw
Down to the swinging stone my soul my flower
Clutched in the claw, ground in the jaw of living :
My pain, the noise that midnight nothing makes,
 Stiff silence shrieking from a polar hell :
(Alas ! bent bone and muscle spent are dumb.)

The watered blood swings slowly in the heat
My sacked heart cracked heart drives upon a spur
Of hope of love of living from the fear
Of death of coffin-scratch of black mole-wooing.
Come, break the bones death, crunch them till the shrieks
They sculpt in hell's air (all hope's lull)
Dwindle in the ice-black tomb.

THE SEASONS

THE sound of summer is the sound of sorrow,
When heaven's outcast falls before the door.
The sound of summer is the sigh of horror,
When the thin scarecrow knows his heart of straw
Shall never flicker to the starling's chatter:
His dry arms droop as dropping sparrows hover.
When brothel-brawling Spring displays his fangs
(Yesman to summer and sin's yoke-fellow)
The raven shrieks with anger. His red wings
Wrinkle the lake he crosses, shake the willow-
Herb fan-dance among the river-sallows,
Drive him at once to strike and mate with swallows.

Twelve months of ice and stone is winter's stature,
Fugue-built, we know him, of twisted bone and vein,
Kingly and kindly, yet not without misfeature.
But should this emblem, randy in his ruin,
Delve for the ducat in my skull, nature
Should cry 'usury' on the sorry creature.
Yes, worse than Winter, with his sable armour,
Is the rain-failer, gobbet-grasping season,
The smiling hatchet-man, second-season mummer,
Whose harvests burn, whose bee-bag's load is poison.
O, heart's bells roar around the bloody haven,
"Where lies my peace, when thus my year lies cloven?"

EMPEROR ZERO ON DEATH

WHERE lies the truth I touted years for, I,
Emperor Zero, slain between altar and sanctuary?
My golden blood, lacing the marble steps,
Blinks in the sun, creeps between crevices
To find in rats' remains a lovelier lie
Than that it flowed for first. Sweet 'pothecary
Civet and centaury held in full-thighed laps,
The paps, the lips and all the queenly faces

Bred in our own or other's time are naught,
Truth's sweetness, so-called, naught beside this peace.
Yet I have hated death, and feared him too,
Figured him out to be the mean old man
Whose bomb caught ladies taking off their skirt,
Shore between lovers locked beneath the sheets;
Who left men speechless; like the mindless snow,
Built barricades between your home and mine.

But now I know him, know that his pictured pain
Is only paper-talk; the left he swings is fake;
Being forgotten's just the only hell.
Death, when you've once smacked off his witless face,
Is no more than a wet page in the rain,
The midnight noise that empty rooms may make,
Or silence screaming from a horned sea-shell.
So, leave this truth stuff, boys, and walk right in!

THE HOMELESS

THERE is no home: only the rotten stick,
The sodden thatch, are there.
As wind winks the rusty latch
Clanks, and silence groans
Above the stairs. Listen,
It is a footstep, come to tell
The listeners there is no home.

*As I made my way through the world
I heard as from a million-fathom bed
The voice of history, all men's story:
Saw the cloaked sword and heard it speak
A tongue of passion and of pain:
Heard age in armour hurrying to war,
Voiceless, its wrinkled claw unsheathed
But strengthless; its white hair bare
But cold. There were words and words
But none told truth. Walking alone
I heard these things and saw these things,
Yet nothing knew, nor knew a word.*

There is no home: only a weed-grown track
Leads past the adder's lair.
Wreathe me, with scabia and with vetch,
A crown, and with these stones
Build hope a cairn.
Old shapes have fled, the house is still.
My heart sobs, "There is no home."

POEM FOR EASTER

TWELVE-TONGUED, the bell Hosannah paints a grave,
Swung in the claws of vultures. Over dead seas
The message slides, rams its unwavering word
Through worm-clogged sockets ; cleaving the womb of woe,
Shows, like a child untimely ripped, the blood
That masks the glory of a birth : but eyes,
Tasting the future's shape feel on the reed
Not vinegar, but swelling grape. The nail
Flames through the world of darkness like a sword.

It was a black beginning when the dove,
Spiked in the breast, fell frozen through the boughs
Into the poacher-pocket. The stiff lord
Dangled from a fence, his thorny eye
Shed peace, they say. The blustering tribal god
Had other business on that day, alas !
That was a pox of pages in the dead
Past. But watch the fled fears on next week's reel ;
See how the promise blossoms. Lo, a bird !

GHOST TO GIRL

“THIS minute had been centuries on the way,
And centuries had ground my granite smooth :
Walls had grown high about my eyes, my ears,
But I had looked to love to fling these down.
Yes, the long years had nightly promised flowers,
Preached me a paradise, syrups in my mind.

But cloak hid sword and clock the swing of youth,
Flower sheltered adder, under stones a sting
Lurked, dreaming unwary feet : my feet, my heart,
Urchin though ancient, cozener, were fleeced ;
And wind’s voice, sack of orts, my centuries’ dower,
Blown seed, was sea-thrown, rotten to the tongue.

The brittle world broke round me as I shrank,
Less-love and lack-pence, waiting for the blow :
Now ran the raping Winter at my heels,
Promised before my cradle clutched its lord :
My making, my undoing, were not mine,
But lay in the hands of angels, hands like claws.

So I lie shamed, discovered in a night
As dark as death, deeper than history :
Mocked from the flower’s bell, scorned by worm,
That pock-patched bitter brother whose is right
To shelter in my shroud, my final friend ;
Thus taste I glory, friends, banquet on bones.

See-saw, my ticking heart will last today,
But the next and the next will be a reign of tears,
Some hill may own me once before the rats
Break through my box and forage for my hopes.
But hope has gone and heaven’s voice is thin :
Now only scarecrow deaf can know the dumb.”

THE WORD

SHARPER than ever, the bright beaks of words
Charm my slim finger. In a full-table time
Even the sockets of my head sprout words
That scream and whimper through my dreams like birds
Lost in a desert, or as the mandrake calls,
A purple rhetoric among the midnight stones.

As flood upon the drum inside my head
Knocks with a ghostly hammer, so my heart,
Mistress of ice and heat, strings out a song
Of words and more than words, that baffle tongue
And the red wine course after thought and thinker
Through lanes that lash my swordhand to my sword.

In this Winter it is the frozen word
That groans upon my doorstep; as Spring buds,
The word whose nest of gold hangs in the sticks:
The tale that kindles in the hyacinth,
Sweeter than civet in a lady's bower, is word,
And word which wrinkles as the red leaf falls.

The bones of words long dead ride on the wind
That sweeps my searching eyes along the years
From blackness into blackness, till like the bird
Our fathers guessed, the word of truth, in light
Stands bare for one brief footfall—then is gone,
And wind blows where he listeth through the tombs.

PSALM CARVED FROM SORROW

AN ocean wags my tomb-tied tongue,
From caverned depths dead eyes in coils stare out :
‘ Look, angel, how the column sways,
Rocks in the raven’s passing wing.
Under the mother-hill a Christmas town
Shudders in starlight. This shall be night
When shambling god, whose flowered fang
Taps weasel’s eggs and coffined pride, bought
In a kingdom’s labour, yearly dies.
Unlace your helmet, then, and sing
Psalms carved from sorrow, heaven’s mountains lurch,
Fling Satan from his summit into light.’

But wordless dreams cast down to wail
Like little Hugh of Lincoln in the night,
Starve on my doorstep. In my praise
The purple psalm of hell they sing
And none to stop their bloody mouths till dawn :
‘ The King of Spain his daughter, dight
With maid’s desire for gold, long
Lusted after more than nutmeg brought,
A mere pear! Come, dry those eyes :
Look past the turret where they wing,
The screaming spearhead making for the marsh.
Cloud’s hounds all-hail you in their flight ! ’

THE POET

IN my hand's seven scrivening bones
A message strides in wordy greaves ;
In my priest-hole heart a knife
Cuts the pages of love's griefs.
Sea-wind and mountain-wind in my elms
Nail to my house-wall unfilled graves,
And choral clock beats time to moles
Processing darkly through sleep's groves.

The wilderness that hides my head
Hides eagle's heart in sparrow's coat ;
The coffin swinging in my ribs
Was carved from oak that bore a boat ;
The monkish pages of my blood
In werewolf moonlight mock the sweet
Movement of my willow-hands,
As God walks with me in the street.

“I LOCKED LOVE'S DOOR.”

I LOCKED love's door, and bade my brother seek
Bread in the byre and song among the kine.
I closed his eyes, stone-pillared in their Winter
And doled with last year's hopes a threadbare crow
To troll him dirge ; meet requiem, a merry mode
I ordered, for the laughing lad whose gods
Coined the red leaves and sat in Satan's chair,
Or with a whisper filched a city's heart,
But never budged a bone when famine prowled.
What wrong was it I wrought ? As I returned
Strewing the churchyard ashes in my way
For fancy's sake, I saw a wrinkled child,
Who watched with orphan-eye my path to peace,
Who screamed and vanished from my father-hand.

IN SUCH A WILDERNESS AS THIS
(FOR NICHOLAS MOORE)

IN such a wilderness as this
Judas, my Judas, what birds?
The thin wren, whose jewelled eye
Slips like a pick-purse hand between
The vulture and his fancy, finds
Only a workhouse stone. Swallow,
Sweet sister, choreography neglects
To stoop above the sparrow's ort,
To glide about the smoky heap
For dung-straw left by hands
Wizened before the year had clutched his heart.
(It is all old and dry and better left unsaid.)

But Judas, speak before the wish
Wrinkles, before the cloud's
Cankered teeth toss lightnings through
My rags, burnish the creaking bone.
This, in a graveyard hour, sends
Passion packing: 'Blood will follow
Blood. One sword in no wise acts
A flower-token in the heart
Of dreamer.' Is it the part of hope
To challenge with painted wands
The mountain-gesture, spit the rebel earth
At sunset while it dozes, Judas, strike it dead?

REMEMBERING LAST YEAR

THE worn hand of the year with rusty key,
With mother-gesture in her fading eye,
This night has opened up a box of tears :
My urchin eyes have goggled as they dropped,
Small empty battles, tragedies of sticks ;
My emperor hands, too stern to play the maid
And pander to the suckling in my blood,
Too soft to shut out memory from the eyes,
Pluck penance out of roses to their ruin,
Hang by my sword, afraid to stark her blade.
Urchin and ancient, stand I in my grief
Watching a younger season's frolics, fears,
Feeling again the fresh wind from the hills,
And the small thorn like spearhead in my breast.

POEM FOR CHRISTMAS

NED TIME, the dragon-toothed, he, shadow on the wall,
No babe might brave. Shunned is he through the length
of land,
As scriptural fury leaping in a five-knifed hand,
Woe-worker, Herod's-henchman. The Christ's thin wail
His bloodhound-homage fetches free, and with the oath
He cozened at the cards from Death, both worlds he
leaves,
Pot-luck to practise, steps stablewards and vanquished
moves
As still as frosty-morning's shivering grasses' breath.
Bright vespers in the fire flare, whispers in the byre :
' Is this the promised poppet or a barnyard brat ?
Knowledge is owed us now whose heels have crossed the
hills.'
' Say on, for we must know : shall this bright baby here
From dark tree dangle bleeding, earth-scorned heaven-fruit ;
This lamb, lap's minion, swing, shriven with three nails ? '

I HAVE KNOWN WINTER

I HAVE known Winter in a time of tears
Walk through the land with burning eyes
To lay men low. In Spring, on rack of words,
Gold hearts have twisted, all because a wind
Has with a ruffian hand bid blood be high,
And swing his bully shoulders in a crowd.

I have known Summer tell another tale
Than Summer in the song and dance has told ;
How in the fields, under a feathered sky,
Young hand has slackened and the eye seen shapes
That haunt the mother-season in a land
Sick to the heart with words, with words of brass.

Only in Autumn, only before the knock
Of bone upon the sheltering oak is heard,
Shall the still peace of suffering be known :
Only in Autumn, when rash blood be let
And garden-spirals show the end of lust,
Smiles tired heart and hearthside words fly free.

THE THREE SELVES

(FOR DONALD FOSTER)

THE beast whose heartbeats echo in my own
Is no man's enemy but mine;
Whose murderous words and worthless tears
Pluck from my strings alone their traitor tune,
Tear from my angel lips alone a midnight groan.

Yet we are fellows: born of one rutting rib,
We know one darkness, follow one star;
And should Death wake us, the same curt word
Would shake Time's corridors with shrieks of fear,
Topple both vein-strung scaffolds, in the red moment rob.

Then who should save us? Not the gutter god
We sneered at, nor the laws we fought,
Nor my fiend's fangs, nor my right arm.
(My Caesar died, alas, before the night
Had whispered saving secrets to my wide-eyed lad.)

Which rising man, who holds my cup of tears
Waiting to drink, is puppy-blind;
Urchin to friend and foe he stands
Cozening history. What difference shall he find
Between the end he loves, the backstairs fate he fears?

WINTER 1939

IN this frost-time pilfering plover
Finds none for brother. Fieldweed sprouts
Like stubble on a corpse, and jawshut door
That through the love-years leaned on latch,
Now grips his greeting in the lock.

Fly high, delve deep heart, you'll not find
The freeword rafternested that you knew :
Even pert saucerclack upon the cup is heard
By muffled agent in the byre,
And oakgrained leatherleg, along the lanes,
Starts over shoulder, shocked, at falling leaf.

What then your secret, lackland lover?
Fly there in fallen-feather notes
No ear but countryear has heard before,
Wings time that none before could watch?
Where do you travel, foam-and-black;
Leads weedlocked tunnel where; what end
To worldwar find you, stream? I grew
In halls a daggerdream no eye nor heart had feared,
Where loglove forced the kiss of fire
Even; trojan-travail prospered; bairns
Before door sprawled, love in the heart of life.

The book closes; nor can joy ever
Tap, tendril-tender, to the beats
Of waiting lover heart, upon his door.
Outside, wrapping the sorrowing wretch,
Devil-faced mists mumble, flock
Terror-screaming martlets, wind
Wakes childbed horrors, teeth gnaw
A way for nightmare through the creaking board.
Tongue stumbles; in their fear
The feeble winghands flutter on the horns
Of madness, kissing the flower-fashioned knife.

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